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Report predicts problems in Mexico

WASHINGTON — The CIA has told President Reagan there's at least a 1-in-5 chance that the Mexican government will collapse within the next five years.

This alarming judgment was delivered to the White House two years ago, but our CIA sources tell us that, if anything, it was an optimistic appraisal. In the last two years, they point out, Mexico's economic and political problems have grown by quantum leaps as the price of oil has fallen and charges of election fraud have hit the headlines.

The prediction of possible disaster was contained in a highly classified National Intelligence Estimate — the most important appraisal of a country that the intelligence community provides to a president. It represents the best intelligence analysis the president and his top advisers receive before policy decisions are made.

The secret, 35-page intelligence estimate begins mildly enough: "The Mexican political system is under greater stress today than at any time under the last 30 years. Ultimately, of course, the preservation of Mexico's stability will rest on the skill and competence of its leaders and on the strength of its political fabric."

The estimate continued hopefully: "We judge that in the end the Mexican political system is likely to remain intact." Then came the kick in the pants:

"But the majority of the intelligence community principals also judge there is roughly a 1-in-5 chance that during the period of this

Merry-Go-Round

Jack Anderson

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estimate — through the remainder of president (Miguel) de la Madrid's term, which ends in 1988, and the first few years after his successor is scheduled to take office — centrifugal forces now at work within the system, combined with internal political opposition and perhaps external pressure, will result in the political destabilization of Mexico."

Because National Intelligence Estimates represent the combined view of all U.S. intelligence agencies, dissent is duly noted. In the case of the dire prediction of Mexico's collapse, the majority of the "intelligence community principals" agreed, but five representatives disagreed with the CIA's pessimistic opinion.

Among those who agreed were CIA Director William Casey; Lt. Gen. Lincoln Faurer, then-director of the National Security Agency; Rear Adm. John L. Butts, then chief of naval intelligence; and the Treasury Department's intelligence unit.

Disagreeing were Lt. Gen. James A. Williams, Defense Intelligence Agency boss; Hugh Montgomery, head of the State Department's intelligence and research bureau; Gen. William E. Odom, Maj. Gen. James Pfautz and Brig. Gen. Larry Smith, the intelligence chiefs of the Army, Air Force and Marines, respectively.

All five have since moved on to other spots.

The dissenters' view was given at length: "While Mexico will experience increased political instability associated with extremely difficult social and economic problems, the probability that these conditions will reach the extreme of political destabilization during the period of this estimate is remote...."

"The complete political destabilization of Mexico would require an extremely well-organized opposition with dedicated leaders capable of challenging one of the most durable and resilient political systems in Latin America." The dissenters felt this was unlikely in the near future.

"Despite these differences of opinion," the intelligence chiefs told the president, "we judge unanimously that in the coming years Mexico will suffer a series of incidents and crises stemming from the forces now at work within that country's society." The president was reminded, perhaps unnecessarily, that "U.S. policy makers will need to monitor (conditions in Mexico) closely to protect U.S. vital interests."